Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: Donald Comer Jr. at the Avondale Office at #6 Office Park Circle, Birmingham

9/9/1980

A: This is an interview with Donald Comer Jr. on September 9, 1980, at the Avondale office at #6 Office Park Circle in Birmingham, with Edward Akin. Mr. Comer, what I was thinking of approaching first, in order to tie in with your ancestry and your past, and since you're in that generation that still has contact, I would imagine, with your granddad, as far as recollections.

C: That's right.

A: What are some of the things that you recall about your grandfather from your childhood memories?

C: Well, I guess one of the main things I recall as a child is that he was a—he was a great family man. He had nine children. Actually, they had ten. One of them died when they were quite young. So there were nine surviving children who grew up as adults and became grandparent themselves. But my grandfather always liked his children to visit with him and to bring their children. So, I had the pleasure as a young child of having Sunday dinner with my grandfather, I guess practically every Sunday that he was in Birmingham.

A: Did he spend most of his time during these latter years down in Barbour County?

C: No, he was—he had the place in Barbour County specifically as just a place to go to. I mean, he had been in the farming business in his early years in Barbour County and had 30,000 acres there which he was farming and I think was probably the largest cotton plantation in the country at the time. But he sold this place completely out and moved to—first to Anniston where he got in the—and set up the grain mill feed business. I mean, they ground corn and sold feed. Uh, but he didn't stay there very long. He moved on into Birmingham in the valley, what is currently the Jim Dandy Feed Mill here in Birmingham. And it was a—in a, uh—1897, of course, he was one of the group who, as a civic venture sort of thing, to employ female as well as male labor, 'cause, of course, Birmingham then was a steel town and it was all male employees. So a group in Birmingham got together and started the Avondale Mills.

A: Now, it was started in 1897…

C: That's right.

A: Was it built then or the next year? Actually when was the mill constructed?

C: Well, I'm not sure about that. You'd have to look that up. I believe they were weaving cloth in 1897 but that could be incorrect. But I'd be glad to look that up.

A: Now, getting on to some of your own recollections of your granddad, what do you recall as some of your own favorite recollections or stories concerning him?

C: Well, he loved to fish and to hunt and in his later years, why, he would spend a month or two hunting in Alaska. I think this would be in the fall. And then in the—in January, February, March, he would establish a camp in Florida, down on the west coast of Florida. He started down on a key there, an island which was uninhabited, a very small island, right out of Everglade City.

A: Were you ever old enough to get to go with him?

C: I was down there, at least to this particular island, I think twice. And then he moved the camp, his camp site up to an island just south of Gasparilla Island, which is where Boca Grande, Florida is located in today. And we were on what is known as La Costa Island. And we were in tents. In both of these locations, we would take tents down and ship 'em down on the freight trains so he wanted to be relatively close to a railroad where he could put all his supplies and provisions on a freight train and get it down to his location. And then he had two boats, thirty-foot open launches, that he had built down there that were local-type fishing boats. And he would hire two guides, local guides who knew all the islands, where the fish were. He had two because he used to like to go out in the Gulf fishing for king fish. 'Course out twelve, fifteen miles and of course, at that time, one boat with one engine in it wasn't the most reliable thing in the world. And, uh, so he had two in case one of 'em broke down, why, the other one could tow that one in. And he would invite his children to come down and spend several weeks, as long as they wanted to for that matter, but it would usually fit in with our spring vacation. And, uh, fish, and swim, and enjoy Florida. He had, at one point, owned a—had gone to Florida down to Bonita Springs, Florida, which is south of Fort Myer—and was going to go into the pineapple and coconut raising business and bought ten thousand acres. And he took a group of employees he had on the farm in Barbour County, got on a sail boat in Panama City, and sailed down to as close as they could get to Bonita Springs on the beach there, and unloaded on the beach and then went up to what is now Bonita Springs and, uh, set up a farming business. And they did pretty good the first year, but then the, uh, they had a cold winter the next winter and all the pineapples froze. So, he decided that wasn't a good business. [Laughs] He moved his—from then on he concentrated on Alabama as far as the farming field went. My father was only eighteen years old at that time, so that dates back pretty good.

A: So, these types of things—the big game hunting, the going to Florida—seems to indicate that not only was he concerned about the family being a close-knit group but it seems, to me at least, that he was trying to promote individualism, individual initiative,[and the] ability to stand on your own two feet.

C: Oh, I think he was. He was very definitely—he didn't believe in pampering anybody and my mother came from Redding, Pennsylvania, and she wasn't used to roughing it and things in the Philadelphia area up there. Why, it was very uncivilized-like. But she knew her children—I mean we all—'course, we were crazy about it and she was a good sport. Father, 'course, had grown up with my grandfather and he loved hunting and fishing, so it was—it was a great outing for all of us, and of course, [it] gives me very fond remembrances of my grandfather. As I say, he was—he didn't pamper his grandchildren, but he

knew how to do things that would be interesting to them. And he made it his business to see that we had a good time.

A: Now, speaking of your father, what are some of the things you can recall that you attribute to making him a good businessman? What, you know, in other words, just look back for a moment and try to assess your dad's business techniques, what kind of businessman he was.

C: Well, my thought it—number one is that my father, to my knowledge (and I have a good knowledge and I have good reason to believe) I don't believe he ever told anybody anything that wasn't so. And, uh, he established himself over a period of time with this reputation. People that knew him [or] knew of him knew that whenever he spoke, why, he was saying what he really thought and, in most cases, knew and believed. So, I think this was his best entrée into doing business with anyone. They didn't have to worry about him misleading them or telling them something that was a little bit off. I mean, he just, he laid it on the table and said, "This is what I think and this is why I think you ought to buy it, or why you ought to sell it." He, over a period of time, he found it relatively easy to do business with people because they had confidence in him and, of course, this established him as a leader because people were very apt to follow someone that they believe in, who has intelligence—I mean, he was a very intelligent man. He read an awful lot. My mother was very intelligent and was a big help to him always. And she had, probably, a more sophisticated schooling than he did. She went to school in the East and, in that day, they probably had better schools at that time.

A: How did your dad end up with a Philadelphian?

C: Well, it was through his sister. He had a sister, Mrs. Craig Smith, and she went to school at Goucher College and my mother was at Goucher College. This college was in Baltimore. I think it is, or right out of Baltimore and they became real good friends. In fact, I think they were roommates while they were there, but they were very good friends. And then there was another lady there from Washington, Helen Brown. She was—there were three of them there in school together in college and then, uh, I don't know whether it was… I think they were still in college or maybe it was right after they graduated, but at any rate, Ms. Smith invited my mother—who was Gertrude Miller—and Helen Brown to visit Birmingham. Yeah, they were in Birmingham at the time. And this started a romance, not only my mother and father but also Fletcher Comer, who was his oldest brother. [He] married Helen Brown, who was the other friend from Goucher.

A: And this was—Camp Helen, I guess, was named after her.

C: That's right. That's correct. So, that was the way they got together. But they were a great couple. I mean, it was obvious to us children that they loved each other very much and so it made for a very happy home life as well, as I say, the feeling that my grandfather had for his children and grandchildren.

A: Now, back to the business, although your granddad continued to be the president of the company, I think on into the late teens…

C: That's right.

A: …I get the impression that once he became governor the day-to-day operation of the mill fell to your father.

C: That's correct.

A: And he was at a fairly young age.

C: That's correct. He'd been in the Army and, well, we'll just have to look up how exactly old he was at that time, but when he came out of the army, why, then he came back to work at Avondale and my grandfather had a lot of confidence in his ability and moved him right along. So, as you say, when he became governor, which was shortly after my father came back and got with the company, why, he was really the administrative head of the business from that time on.

A: Was it your father's idea, or did your father ever go into exactly what led him to move from one small mill—relatively small mill—to an expansion program? Okay, first buying the central mill in Sylacauga.

C: No, I think it's like anything else. If you do something well, I mean you have to want to do more of it. And, of course he came on—came on at a time [when] there had been a lot of mills built.

A: By local booster types.

C: Well, not only that, but a lot of… the Eastern capital thought they could see the textile industry moving south. And so they wanted to be in the moving part of it. I mean in the—people that had machinery, who were building machinery, and had interest in mills in the East. I mean, they were the ones who established these—a lot of these plants, most of these plants were established in the South by Eastern capital. And there were some of the type in Birmingham, but that was in the minority, I believe. I know it was in the case of Alabama.

A: In this area.

C: And uh, but the thing was they had absentee management. And the absentee management just was not very good at communicating with the Southern labor market. I mean it, uh—I don't know just what it was and, I mean, the problem…. 'Course, then absentee management—I mean, really you know if… You had quite a communication problem between the manager-owner up in New England and the man down here, I mean.

A: Their communications weren't as good

C: That's right. You had to do it mostly by handwritten letters. I mean, the way most of the letters were written by hand and mailed and I don't guess the mail was all that fast in those days either, so it… wasn't like picking up the phone or jumping on the plane or whatnot. But anyway, it evidently—it did not work very well, because these plants that we bought were relatively new plants but were losing substantial money and so forth, where they just wanted out. And so, I think it was a case in—well I say in case—I know in all cases, why, it was a… It was really a bargain, I mean, if you felt like you could run it and make any money at all, why, it was—it was just too good of a bargain to resist.

A: You were speaking of—of the problem that northern management had in understanding southern labor. When I've been reading through your father's papers and general histories of the southern textile industry, I almost get the feeling that it and the early period of the twentieth century was about where New England was, say, back in the 1850s, as far as labor coming in from the farm, first generation—

C: That's right. That's right.

A: How much did that sort of thing have to do with your father establishing a full-fledged company welfare system? A type of thing that would encourage parents to see that their children were well taken care of, this sort of thing?

C: Well…

A: How much of it was his own feeling of social consciousness? You know, or can you divide—

C: Oh, I think it was—it was all of this. I don't think he was, there was nothing…there was no mold that he was trying to—you know, that he had read, I mean, knew had gone on somewhere else. And, because what he was doing, I'm sure, were things that were in his own mind. As I say, he read a lot. And, I mean, he read, you know, books of philosophers and—and what he didn't know, my mother read more than he did because she could read. She was just unbelievable the way she could read a book. She would just sit there and turn the pages. And a book, to her, was a one-day program. I mean, just—talk about photographic minds, or whatever it is—but, anyway, she could… she could really read fast. So, I'm sure he got ideas, things that came to him, I mean, things that he read and read that had been tried and failed—read that had been successful and whatnot. But he was—his programs were nothing in the book that said this was…Amoskeag Mill did this in England. Because New England mills did not—their management did not coincide with my father's ideas of management at the Avondale Mills.

A: In growing up, how—how would you describe your childhood, your years of elementary and high school?

C: Well, they were—they were pretty shaky. I wasn't the greatest. I wasn't any shining example of what you would want a child to be. But, I don't guess I was too, too rough. But I was—I was… Well, number one: I was out of school when I was—after my first year of college. It was—my father was in New York managing the defunct Hunter Company, this sales organization that had gone broke there in New York, owing Avondale a lot of money and among all the other customer mills. So, he was there that summer, also. And I was there. I was out of school, so I was there, but I was working in the sample department, cutting the samples in the sales operation. And I got interested in the sales organization that summer. I got to know the company pretty well, the people there and whatnot. So we felt—I proposed that I just stay on there and it suited my father all right. Because, as I say, he wasn't overly enthusiastic about my time in school. And—but—so this was what happened. I mean, I was in school here in public school until I was fourteen. Then, I went to the Hill School in Pennsylvania, which was close by where my mother came from originally; she knew it. And I was there until my senior year of high school. I graduated here at Phillips High School in Birmingham. And [I] went to the University of North Carolina to start my freshman year.

A: Which would have been what year?

C: I guess I was—I think I went to New York in either ’31 or ‘2. Roosevelt was coming in.

A: Yeah. So, probably the fall of ’32.

C: That’s right. I was in New York when he was elected, I think.

A: Getting back to the childhood, once again, I want to make sure this story is straight because if it is, it certainly shows how your father and, I guess the family as a whole, really lowered social barriers, as far as the mill folk and the Comer family itself.

C: That’s right.

A: Flora Brooks Thompson said that when she was in kindergarten, you were in kindergarten—you were in kindergarten with her at the mill.

C: Well, this is probably so.

A: Do you recall that?

C: No, but it is probably so.

A: The age of four or five, which is many years ago.

C: Yeah, yeah. And my aunts—they taught in that kindergarten out there, as well. But—

A: And then it strikes me again that rather than you graduating from Hill, your parents had you come back and graduate from a public school. That is striking and, of course, as I understand it, you did the same thing with Donald III—that he finished at Shades Mountain.

C: That’s right, that’s right. He was going to be in Alabama. He wanted to go to the University of Alabama and actually, we figured as long as he was going to be here, why, he may as well know some of the people and be a lot better off going to the university if he had been in the graduating class of the high school here in Birmingham. He graduated over here from Shades Mountain High School.

A: Now, so you started in the textile business after that first year of college.

C: That’s right.

A: Did you ever go back to college?

C: No, no. I had always, well, when I was young, why, there wasn’t so much of this going on. I mean, I thought…but even after I got to be in the thirties or forties, I mean I thought it was time to go back and maybe do some kind of course, but I never did. I don’t know what I would have done if I had.

A: You spoke earlier of the problem of the communications systems as far as things on the ground and what’s happening at the home office somewhere else. Now, your dad was more or less forced into a

financial situation where he had to help out the defunct Hunter Company. I think—did he organize Southeastern Cotton…

C: That's right. That's right.

A: …as a means of marketing the goods?

C: That's right.

A: What about the amount of time he spent in New York? Of course, he had his brothers here—

C: That's right.

A: Which helped, I'm sure.

C: That's right. And then he was back and forth a lot. I mean, he was—

A: Catch the Piedmont?

C: That's right. The Crescent.

A: Yeah.

C: Well, the Piedmont, too. I guess—

A: Yeah, two trains daily.

C: That's right. But, they—he was back and forth. I mean, of course, in being at the sales end, why then, get a pretty good insight about the overall business. I mean, if you're sitting there and seeing what goes on and sells, you get a different viewpoint than if you are down here in a vacuum without the knowledge of what people are saying about you are making or why you can't get more or why—so, it was a good experience, really, from as far as Avondale went, then, to have that experience there in New York.

A: Now, when did he come back from New York on a fairly permanent basis? Of course, I know he was still making business trips.

C: Well, I've—I had to go back and see because he was really there only that first year and on a regular basis. And then after that he was more down here.

A: And you were basically in charge.

C: No, I was—I was just a boy, just a boy. I mean, no—I—it was more in the 1940s before I really got in the middle of all this.

A: Who was in charge of the New York office?

C: Well, initially, they had a man who was in the Army and… but he didn't work out. He wasn't there but a couple of months. And, uh, and then they got a man named L.R Curtis and, um, and Curtis had been in the textile business and I think he had retired from a smaller business than what we had and he done a good job and he had only been out—had just retired, I think. But anyway, they hired him just to come in as a… for the time being really. And then Howard Coffin was our Chairman of the Board. And Howard Coffin had been the head of Hudson Motor Company and then sold to whomever they sold to and then Coffin retired and then he built Sea Island. He was in the process of having built Sea Island and took all his money and built a beautiful place and he got through this about the time the Depression really hit so he hung onto the place but it really got all his money and he really needed to go to work. They hired him as chairman of the board. And then Russell Smith was brought in from the Manhattan Bank. He had been one of the top officers; he wasn't the head of the bank, but he was—I think it was Executive Vice President. And so they brought him in as president when Curtis retired.

A: Now, in 1935 the corporate headquarters of the operational part of the company was switched from Birmingham to Sylacauga. What was the—

C: No. Yeah, that's right.

A: What was the rationale of the reason behind that?

C: Well, the main thing was the—I don't know if you were aware of the flying squadrons they had, you know, in the—right after Roosevelt was—

A: Oh, the labor activity.

C: That's right, and the organized people, they had these new laws that gave them—the unions—more authority, power to organize and whatnot than they previously had. At any rate, they jumped on it and they organized. I mean, these groups organized and the ones that would get in the automobiles would ride around and try to organize those mills that were not organized. And they were armed people. They were come what have you and so the only mill that they—we had a real problem with them was in Birmingham because there were a lot of coal miners and steel workers and whatnot and they joined them in this group. And they surrounded the Birmingham plant. And we closed it because my father was afraid, you know, there'd be a lot of blood shed if we didn't close it, so we just closed it and we closed and said, we'll move on out, and when the people want to go back to work, we'll start up again. And the plant was closed by Avondale for three weeks, but it must be a matter of record. I can look this up for you. But my father was very angry…because we couldn't get in and out of his office. He was shut out. So, uh, he made the statement then. 'Course, you'll get put in jail now if you make this statement, but he said, "I'm going to shut it down this time, but if closes again, this'll be it." But he moved the office from Birmingham to Sylacauga 'cause he didn't want to get locked out anymore.

A: Yeah.

C: So that's when they moved.

A: Also, I was wondering, Sylacauga would also be a fairly central location as far as—

C: No it was definitely a better situation because it was, like you say, more centrally located and, by far, our largest mill right there in Sylacauga.

A: So, you had three mills already.

C: That's right, and the largest mill was Eva Jane mill which was larger than the mill in Birmingham.

A: Now, before NRA came in, were all the mills just on a one-shift basis?

C: Yeah.

A: And then went to the two shifts with the reduction in hours.

C: Went to three shifts. See, we're on three now

A: You're on three now. Did you immediately get on three?

C: Yeah, it seems to me that we did. I don't know whether it was immediately. We may have gone, well yeah, because with NRA we had a forty-hour deal and that was before the NRA and we didn't run very long; just a one forty-hour shift. And I think we moved into the three shifts probably as quick as we could. I don't know if we ever did much two-shift out there out there, but there again…

A: Mr. Comer, I had to end this abruptly, but I know you're pressed for time.

C: Alright, well, I'm—

A: So, we will continue this…

C: Okay.

A: …at another time.

C: Good. Well, you probably know better idea what you want me to talk about...

[TAPE ENDS]